

We all worship Paramount, hallowed be they that owns Star Trek and many things Trekish. We also offer a prayer to Alan Decker, who on the seventh day created Star Traks. Please think good thoughts at Maija Meneks, who has decided to play in the warped universe of Star Trak.

### **This is Borg?**

The Greater Consciousness of the Borg finished its downloading of instructions to Exploratory-class Cube #347, leaving the sub-collective to its own designs. Impulse engines pushed the ship out of orbit and away from planet #98. Deep within the heart of the cube, power systems came on-line, activating the transwarp drive. With a blur of motion, the ship streaked away.

Twelve hours and twenty light years later, an automatic system awoke 4 of 8. An eye opened as the Borg came on-line and disengaged from its alcove. The eye momentarily glazed over as mind dipped back into the cube's intranet; files were scanned and instructions read. What followed next would probably be beyond the experiences of any race who had ever met the Borg.

"Aw, sh\*\*," echoed throughout the empty catwalks and slumbering forms in alcoves. For good measure, the expletive was repeated on the net, starting the waking process of the other members of the sub-collective.

Exploratory-class Cube #347 with its four thousand drones was not exactly cream of the Borg crop. A better analogy might be to compare the group with a wisp of fly-away hair. As long as the Greater Consciousness continually concentrated on the sub-collective, everything ran fine; the moment attention was diverted elsewhere (and it often was with many thousands of cubic light years and billions of sub-collectives to coordinate), this particular fly-away would nip off down to the salon and proceed to be dyed orange, purple, and florescent green.

All the drones on Cube #347 had been assimilated as adults from various humanoid civilizations and exploratory ships the Borg had come across. Most were quite happy, in a brain-washed way, to be a Borg. However, those same drones hadn't quite had their former individuality successfully severed from their minds. It was an imperfection in the assimilation process which was still being worked out, but four thousand out of many trillions was not bad.

Instead of eliminating those imperfections, which otherwise made fine drones, they had been gathered and placed on a single ship, which could be sent out on long assignments. Additionally, several drones with other problems (deviants and misfits was the common term to be heard on non-assimilated worlds) had been thrown in the mix. Those long assignments kept the sub-collective relatively isolated from the Greater Society, which in turn cut down the probability of accidental infection of individualness. The Greater Collective was always there in the background, but the ship was monitored in much the same way a human mind might monitor the actions of his or her little toe; i.e. very little unless it was seriously stubbed. This relative freedom, however, had only reinforced the individuality and eccentricity of the drones of Cube #347.

What the Greater Conscious didn't know wouldn't hurt it, but the cube had worked out a slightly alternate form of collective hierarchy and command different from the Borg norm.

4 of 8 frowned. "I didn't want to be Captain this assignment. Why do I have to be Captain?"

"Because it is your turn in the rotation," said 3 of 8 from his alcove. "Wake us when we are needed, but otherwise keep your commiserations to yourself."

4 or 8, now Captain, turned, "First things first. Stop speaking in that stupid plural crud.

The Greater Consciousness is half-way across the quadrant dealing with some other problem."

There was no answer. Around Captain, the cube was becoming more and more active. Because of potential individuality conflicts, this cube had to have a command hierarchy with designated minds in charge. Normal sub-collectives would have a simple consensus to change course. This ship had to make sure the wishes of a few didn't cause the cube to weave like a drunken freighter crew. Sighing, he dipped back into the net, flitting around the system to activate what needed to be activated. Dropping his mind to the center of the traveling cube, he felt along the grid until he came upon a particular entity.

{Rise and shine, 12 of 19. If I have to suffer, you have to as well. You are going to head engineering this shift.}

In alcoves next to each other, two Borg which looked remarkably similar, down to nicks in their prosthetics, became aware. {Captain,} the two returned across the net in perfect unison, {I understand. I am also are going to make sure your next regeneration cycle gives you a horrible rash which will not be irrelevant.}

{You are the best of the engineering drones, you know.}

{I know.}

Captain's consciousness left the main engineering grid, leaving the bodies of 12 of 19 staring at the alcove shaft. "This is my fourth time in charge in the last six assignments, so I will be designated Delta A & B for the duration," was logged onto the net.

Delta A & B had been female twins prior to their assimilation; very close twins. After their conversion to Borg, they had grown so close that they had essentially become one mind split between two bodies. They even shared the same numerical designation because the Greater Collective was divided by mental signatures, not organic bodies. The twins in many ways embodied the eventual perfection the Borg hoped to achieve, namely one mind in many bodies. Until that time, however, the twins frankly gave the Greater Consciousness the screaming willies, and so they had been shuttled off to Cube #347.

Delta separated, body A going to directly observe the status sensors of all the reactors, while B began to go over the maintenance docket. One advantage of two bodies was two brains; multitasking was very easy. Trouble with intake manifold #21 caught Delta's attention. A rodent's nest was blocking it? Rodent nest?

{27 of 27! When I find you, you are spare parts!} screamed over the net, scrambling several conversations subpartitions were having among themselves. Captain felt a headache coming on.

Out near one of the ship's corners, 27 of 27 winced. He had just found out he had 'won' the lottery for primary drone maintenance for the assignment...also known as Doctor. Delta was going to go through the hull.

Doctor had been a veterinarian prior to his assimilation. His affinity with non-sentients had unfortunately carried over to his Borg existence. Consequently, he often assimilated pets and other small animals on the planets the cube visited, which was strictly against regulations. The animals were too primitive mentally to enter onto any Borg net, but nanite enhancements made the creatures extremely hard to exterminate. In this case, Doctor had smuggled aboard several pairs of a six-legged, hamster-like animal which bred quickly and, to make matters worse, could convert light directly to metabolic energy due to special cells in the epidermis. They were also incredibly cute.

Doctor watched the net as a sub-collective-wide directive was posted to kill any hamster found. Deciding to keep as low a profile from Delta as possible, he uploaded his personal docket

to examine the maintenance requests which were already being filed to his schedule.

Back in his section, Captain was observing the general chaos to which the cube was sliding towards. On one level he knew this was the price for his imperfect assimilation; and on another, his Borg-self was horrified at the inefficiency. "Three more command posts to go," Captain muttered to himself. "Only three more to go." Into the intranet he called, {I would like Sensors, Weapons, and Assimilation to report in.}

{1 of 3 reporting, Captain. 1 of 3 drew the [card] for Sensors this shift.} 1 of 3 was one of three non-humanoids on the cube. Specifically, she was insectoid in shape, which had caused a no-so-minor problem in alcove assignments when she was first put on the cube. Later a proper alcove had been shipped over from a cube which included her species, but regeneration before that point had been most interesting for 1 of 3, now Sensors. She also had the troubling tendency to refer to herself in the third person; and the translator algorithm for her species was less than precise.

The Borg, until recently, had been specialists in humanoid assimilation. Within the last century, however, an increasing number of non-humanoids had been taken in the quest for perfection. Assimilation imperfection had proven to happen regardless of species or general shape, so the Greater Consciousness had efficiently added non-humanoids to the crew of Cube #347.

{Sensors, you will remember most of the drones on this ship naturally see in a spectrum that is different from your own? So you will not neglect sensor readings in that spectrum?}

{Yes, Captain. Sensors does [understand].}

{Fine. Weapons? Assimilation?}

Weapons tended to be a difficult position on the ship. Each subsection of the cube potentially had complete control of weapons in the area, but non-coordination of those weapons could lead to enemies making hits that they otherwise would not have a chance at targeting. Thus, Weapons had to be able to have his or her or its control commands be more powerful than the occasional panicked subsection.

A crash could be heard on the catwalk two sections below, followed by the sound of a body hitting a bulkhead even further down. A request for maintenance was placed on Doctor's docket just as a forceful voice reported in to Captain, {45 of 300 is Weapons.}

{You've been Weapons since you were first placed on Cube #347. There are other drones as qualified as yourself which need to be given the chance in a proper Collective manner.}

{45 of 300 is Weapons. 45 of 300 will always be Weapons. It doesn't matter who wins the weapons lottery because 45 of 300 will be Weapons regardless. I /am/ Weapons!} The last statement was screeched both on the net and aloud from the lower catwalk.

{If you don't follow the Captain's directives this time, Weapons, I swear I will launch you into the nearest star. The Greater Consciousness was very disappointed when we managed to blow up that colony ship of species #4310. Many good potential drones were lost.}

Silence greeted that remark, which Captain decided to take as consent, rather than try force a verbal or net acknowledgment from the unstable drone. He was a good tactical drone, it was true...sometimes too good.

{Assimilation? You are last.}

A deep, regretful sigh replied, {This is 13 of 20. My rotation for this position has come up. Do you know how boring it is to grow nanites? We assimilate a small scout ship, and it is busy for a time, then the boredom sets in again. I might as well go watch the paint dry on the hull...more exciting there.}

{Whatever, Assimilation.} Captain dismissed Assimilation from his immediate mind, although something kept tugging him about the designation of 13 of 20. He would recall that drone's history at a more convenient time. Okay, final task. Captain stepped from his alcove, then reached out his unaltered hand to manually tap a few controls against an alcove next to his own. The two remaining eyes of 3 of 8 (he had started with four) opened before a peevish remark came out, "Why did you reawaken us?"

"I told you to end with that plural crap. Since I need a second for redundancy, I decided to volunteer you and your winning personality. Up and at 'em!"

"Joy," responded Second as he ended his regeneration cycle.

Captain allowed the assignment orders to filter out into the general awareness of the sub-collective. Collective sensors had picked up a ship of unknown configuration in quadrant 10036, and Cube #347 was to go investigate. As much information was to be gathered as possible, and any lifeforms (Sentients only, Doctor) to be assimilated and returned to the Greater Collective before they became too damaged through exposure to the ship's sub-collective.

{Finally, 354 of 510...you will /not/ attempt to make course corrections when the sensors pick up variable stars, no matter how artistic they may be. Art is irrelevant. This goes double for 15 of 39...no ship surfing of singularities. The last time you managed to pull that stunt, we were dead in space reconstructing all the reactor cores you managed to blow. Ten redundant systems, and this cube lost them all!}

The busy, proper, hum of work shifts greeted Captain's mental ears. Delta was busy doing minor repairs; hunter-killer teams had managed to remove twenty-three hamsters; Doctor was repairing a prosthesis of a drone hurt in a twelve meter fall; Weapons had not managed to explode anything yet (to his disappointment); Sensors was paying attention to all frequencies; Second was doing what it was seconds do between his complaints and sulks; and Assimilation was quiet.

A reminder, the Borg equivalent of a yellow sticky note, flitted across Captain's net consciousness in response to the thought of Assimilation. He brought the dossier of 13 of 20 into active memory, swiftly digesting the information. Lovely...that was why the designation sounded familiar. An extremely depressed drone. The hierarchy under Assimilation this assignment would need constant watching to make sure the entire sub-group didn't try to jump ship for personal reentry in some Jovian planet.

Cube #347 was definitely underway in what passed for normal operations. Three more days to the sighting at quadrant 10036. 'Why couldn't I have been properly assimilated like trillions of other Borg?' thought Captain for the umpteenth time.

Captain felt something gnawing on his ankle as he came out of his regeneration cycle. He looked down to see a six-legged ball of hair attempting to chew through his body suit. Frowning, he lifted the foot and shook the hamster off and onto the catwalk, then swiftly stepped on the too-cute thing before it could scamper away. The hamster made a satisfyingly squishy sound. Dropping into net, Captain added a tally mark to the electronic board dedicated to the rodent removal.

In his subsection, Doctor shuddered as yet another assimilated hamster was killed. Although non-sentients could not enter the Borg nets, Doctor's empathy with the animals he assimilated allowed him to sense when they died. An awful lot of them were dying with the scent of burnt hair in the air or under the shadow of a descending foot.

Captain absently wiped the bottom of his foot on the edge of Second's alcove, who was still midway through his regeneration cycle. As he stood balanced on one foot, examining the bottom of the other to see how deeply the hamster guts had managed to work into the treads of his sole, a loud alert klaxon began to chirp.

Sensors called, {The [puzzle] ship is within sensor range.}

Captain sent an acknowledgment, followed by the command which would interrupt Second in his regeneration, then made his way along the catwalk to an intersection which included a distribution node and several small terminals. A button by a terminal was depressed, and an exterior view of the intruder was shown on the screen.

Captain squinted at the small round screen with a vaguely fish-eyed view of the universe. Why the Borg continued to use this type of inefficient and obsolete technology was beyond his ken. Totally inadequate. If he was to use these screens, the Collective should install the big ones like the majority of the rest of the races in the galaxy used. Grumbling to himself, he turned off the screen, then fell into the sub-collective's net.

{Sensors, I'm hooking into the sensor grid. Please don't do anything weird to the grid until I ask for it.} Sensors sent her ascent as Captain and the rest of the cube looked at the other ship. It appeared to be two flattened globes joined to each other along a thin cylinder, the total length being two hundred meters. An image-thought floated up from the deeper part of the sub-collective from an assimilated human designated 20 of 212.

{Dumbbell?} returned Captain. {That is the proper word to describe it?} The reply was firm. {Dumbbell. Unusual design. Do we have anything like it on file?}

If there was one ultimate strength to the Borg, it was its sheer number-crunching ability. With a task before it, four thousand organic processors made a better computer than anything of silicon could...and these processors were enhanced by the best of assimilated technologies. Database after database of countless ship designs of thousands of cultures was discarded as Cube #347 cautiously linked in with the Greater Collective to sample the archives. Pulling back to firmly reestablish its sub-collective, Cube #347 knew that the ship was of a new format.

{Infrared and subspace overlay, Sensors. Weapons, have they noticed us yet?}

The visual of the ship altered to show the new frequencies. Unusually, the globe at the front of the ship glowed, signifying engines. Unless the pilot normally traveled in reverse at warp two, something odd was going on. No subspace radio emanations could be seen.

{Weapons reports that the alien ship has still not reacted to our presence. Shields are of standard design and easily penetrated by transporter, phasers, and tractor beam. All subsections are ready to destroy the intruder.}

{No, no, no! We have to get a look at the technology first! Or at least find out why they use a front-engine drive. There may be new technology, or at least variations on the old, to claim for the Collective.}

{Sensors must report that there are no [electric bees] on board.}

{Noted.} Captain paused for a couple of seconds as the most plausible translation for Sensors' statement was determined. Finally, a decision tree matrix cascaded through the sub-collective. {Okay, we will match course with the intruder, apply a tractor, and pull the whole thing out of warp. Second, 4 of 24, and 5 of 24 will beam over to take a look around. Proceed.}

{Then do we get to destroy it?}

{No, Weapons. We will not be destroying it quite yet.}

Second, 4 of 24, and 5 of 24 emerged from the green transporter beam in the room which

should be the bridge. The ship's computer had been mildly helpful until electronic intruder alerts had closed off all communication between the dumbbell and the Borg cube.

{Could you all pan around the room? We'd like to get a better look than the back of a couple of chairs and a dark viewscreen, you know,} Captain sent. Obediently 4 of 24 and 5 of 24 did so. Second perversely closed his eyes.

Downloading the computer's active memory and archives was a simple affair. With four thousand minds to work on breaking encryption codes, hacking the system was completed in minutes. Captain had begun examining the data flow when 4 of 24 exclaimed, {There is something here!}, followed by the familiar feeling of a Borg forcefully leaving the net because of death.

{Life signs! I thought you said there were no life signs, Sensors!}

{Sensors says that there are no [electric bees] detected, either then or now. And log information shows that crew abandoned [barbell] approximately two [sols] ago.} Sensors helpfully brought up and highlighted the appropriate passages which Captain had not gotten to as of yet in his skimming.

{Second? What is the situation?}

{There appears to be an automatic system that was triggered when 4 of 24 went to go through a door at the side of the bridge area. We are disarming the system now. Doctor, 4 of 24 is ready to transport at any time for parts.}

Second watched as the body of 4 of 24 shimmered green before disappearing. He completed the disarming of the system with a few well-placed blasts of a sonic disrupter which shattered delicate crystals with a muffled crack. 5 of 24 went forward to force open the doors.

The room behind the doors was opulent in the extreme. Gold and silver decorated the walls, while gem encrusted tables were scattered about. A large dais with ebony chair dominated the room, which also held several movable benches covered in a shimmering suede hide. Decent resources, thought Second, the gold especially would be useful in plating certain systems. On the dais, a figure flickered into view.

"I am the mighty and wise Ghari! To hear my words is to hear the words of God! Bow before me and worship!"

Or at least, that is what the figure said in its own language. The two Borg stood there and listened to the gibberish, confident a translation would be available shortly. On the dais, the figure, a humanoid biped sporting six eyes, four holes which might have been ears, no observable nose, and a very large mouth, stopped in his speech. The golden cape shimmered as it folded about a body encased in a molded suit of ivory cloth. "Who the hell are you?"

On the cube, a debate was raging on what to do. Finally sentiment deciding to assimilate first, ask questions later, won out. Second and 5 of 24 advanced on the figure.

"Stop! I command you! You don't belong here. Where's my crew? What did you do to my crew?"

Second stopped at the dais and reached out with one hand, prepared to shove assimilation tubules into the sentient, if only to shut him up. Translation was coming through now, and the demands were giving him a headache. Surprised, his hand passed right though the being's arm; a similar occurrence happened to 5 of 24. The two Borg looked at each other.

"Hologram," muttered Captain. "It's a hologram." He was now rapidly scanning logs and data entries. Jharin was the name of the race, and Ghari their major religious icon. The room was a shrine and the hologram a part of the shrine. Captain never had been much of a religious being before assimilation, and now, as a Borg with a mostly Borg mindset, the concept was irrelevant

and often confusing.

Ghari had resumed speaking. "Well, since my crew seems to have disappeared, perhaps due to infernal means, you will have to do. Bow to me and worship me as your supreme savior."

The two Borg continued to look at each other, then turned to stare with disbelief at the holographic religious icon. "You have got to be kidding," said Second. "We are Borg. Religion is irrelevant...and yours is particularly backwards and annoying. As soon as I can figure out how to shut you off...." Second trailed off as his (and 5 of 24) subspace transceiver suddenly stopped working. He was cut off from Cube #347.

Meanwhile, on the ship, Captain was raging on the net, hell incarnate. {The signal just cut off! Sensors, give me a reason why. Weapons, target ship, but do not fire.} The undersignal was still there, the one which told the sub-collective their two Borg companions remained alive, but at the narrow bandwidth, no meaningful data could be transmitted nor could a transporter lock be established.

{Sensors says that a rapidly [yo-yoing] shield that practically [fizzles] with subspace distortions has englobed the shrine room.}

Another voice emerged from the general sub-collective, {Ship schematics and historic files indicate that the presence of the shield is for religious reasons, namely to make sure nothing interrupted the preaching of their icon, not even the universe.} A pause, {There is also good indications it is meant to keep worshipers from fleeing. Some of the rules in their scriptures are rather detailed, and the consequences of noncompliance quite painful.}

{Fine, fine. The question now is to blow the ship to atoms or try to rescue Second and 5 of 24. Please form consensus while I hail the ship. Weapons...you may not offer your suggestion, as we already know it.}

Captain mentally fiddled with the communications. For the sake of protocol, he opened the channel's visual signal to return a picture from a camera facing into subsection 12 with its rows of catwalks and alcoves. He would prefer a face-to-face conversation, even if it was with a hologram, but there was the Borg image to uphold.

"Jharin ship, this is the Borg. You will respond." Nothing in return. "Jharin ship, if you do not respond, we will blow you to the irrelevant hells you so like to contemplate." A response came, audio-only.

"This is Ghari, supreme prophet and chosen of the Gods. You will not blaspheme in such a way, or the Gods will strike you dead and damned."

"Ghari, I'm sure your Gods would already consider us dead and damned, but we are not here to discuss theology. Two Borg are held captive. Lower your shields or we will be forced to kill you. Hologram or not, I'm sure you do not want to end your existence."

"Hah! You will not kill them while I hold them! You have a weakness! I will keep the two and convert them to the Faith!"

"The Borg have no weakness. The efficiency of this ship may slightly decrease without the units, but they are superfluous. You will be destroyed. This is your final warning."

While Ghari spouted off more meaningless drivel, consensus on the action to take was trickling in. The majority was for rescuing the two Borg, although many had wanted to just destroy the ship and scavenge the leftover debris. An alert drone from subsection 15 posted a plan to the net; she had been idly scanning the gigabytes of religious text and come across an interesting coincidence. Delta read the plan and immediately agreed, browbeating much of her part of the ship to also comply. Captain personally thought the idea ludicrous, but consensus was with the plan.

"Then we have to choice but to destroy you, and your soul, Ghari, as well as the souls of your Gods," interrupted Captain into Ghari's tirade. "Appearing all over your ship in places your shields are not reaching, I am sending you what you most fear...demons from the pits of hell." As Captain spoke, wave after wave of hamsters were captured by transporter beams and deposited on the Jharin ship. Ghari screamed over the subspace radio link.

"Demons! There are demons aboard! You have sent a plague of demons to defile the sacred halls within this hull! Have your crew back, I must rid this ship of the contamination." As the shields dropped from the shrine, transporter lock was reestablished and Second and 5 of 24 beamed back to Cube #347. The Borg cube immediately backed off several thousand meters as the Jharin ship began to fire ineffective phasers.

Green phasers from the upper and lower corners of the cube facing the intruder ship lanced out, melting through the conventional shields of the ship and striking near the engine area of the first globe. The explosion which followed was the spectacular red of burning oxygen; the fire swiftly extinguished as gasses became too tenacious in the vacuum of space to burn.

{Weapons! I did not tell you to fire!}

{I slipped.}

{Slipped? You can't slip. You have to give the command code on the net.}

{It was firing at us. It was reflex.}

{It was trigger-happy nonsense. If there was star anywhere within three light years, you would be taking a stroll in its plasma right now. Understand?}

{Yes. I understand.}

{Good. Be sure you continue to understand.}

Captain looked longingly towards his alcove out on the catwalk. Well, at least the assignment was over. All he had to do was contact the Greater Collective, give his report, finish ridding the cube of the hamsters (yes, there were still a few about, unfortunately), then shut down. It would be 5 of 8's turn to be Captain next assignment.

Captain felt the presence of the Greater Consciousness focus elsewhere, letting his imperfectly assimilated individuality slowly reform. We's became I's once more, and the thoughts of trillions dwindled back to that of four thousand. They were not to report back to main Borg space, and the assignment appeared to be far from over. This had been a sub-task of a much longer deployment, the docket of which was now in the intranet of the sub-collective.

Captain absently kicked a hamster out of the way as he walked back to his alcove. Well, maybe when they eventually scouted the Jharin home-systems, he could find out why the species put their engines in front of their ship.